

THE WHITE PROTOTYPE: RACIAL BIAS IN LEADERSHIP

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## **ABSTRACT**

Given the lack of leadership research that accounts for race and ethnicity, this study examines the experiences in leadership advancement for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, or BIPOC. The experiences of BIPOC are treated as rare cases rather than a source for information on important social context, like the impacts of race in leadership and social experiences. In literature, race is usually isolated to assess the influence of other variables, like managerial abilities or performance ratings. Currently, there is little research that has occurred to address BIPOC who have advanced into leadership positions. Through qualitative investigation, five participants shared their narratives about their ascension into leadership roles and positions. The key themes uncovered were preparation, initiative and hard work due to racism, and negativity. The data collected illustrated these three themes and five associated sub-themes. These themes and subthemes serve as a springboard for future research to examine BIPOC seeking advancement into leadership positions.

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## INTRODUCTION

Increasing recognition of the impact of inclusive leadership has enhanced the focus of diversity in organizations in Fortune 500 companies across the United States (Deloitte & Alliance for Board Diversity, 2019). According to Deloitte (2019), 34% of Fortune 500 companies' board seats are held by people of color and women, which is an increase from 12.6% in 2016. Despite this milestone in Fortune 500 companies, past research suggests that leaders who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) continue to face barriers to leadership roles that their White counterparts do not, such as exclusion from social and informational networks, discrimination, and bias in the workplace (Cook & Glass, 2013). In addition, racial/ethnic minorities are promoted less frequently compared to their White counterparts and are viewed less favorably in job suitability ratings (Sy, Shore, Strauss, Shore, & Tram, 2010).

Race remains an under-researched area in leadership (Ospina, & Foldy, 2009). Race is a focal point to how individuals define themselves with a shared definition of differences that groups and cultures consider significant, like ancestry, practices, beliefs, and language (Bonsteel, 2012). If individuals are defining and informing themselves based on their race, then the principle follows that their individual definition of leadership must be informed by race as well. Additionally, the majority of authors use a standard definition for leadership: the action of leading people or an organization (Shore et al., 2009). In this definition, there are no contextual variables that define leadership. Without addressing a racial context in leadership, the study of leadership remains incomplete. Incorporating racial context in leadership will provide a path to explore the full depth of leadership. To efficiently and effectively

incorporate context in understanding leadership, race should be studied as it relates to leadership, especially organizational leadership.

The experiences of BIPOC are treated as rare cases rather than a source of information on important social context, like the impacts of race in leadership and social experiences. According to Tillman (2004), research that explicitly covers the perspective of BIPOC is either ignored or downplayed. Racial gaps in the leadership field reduce the complexity of leadership and leave out many leadership experiences that are not considered.

For example, in a recent article by McKinsey & Company (2021), the authors explored Black workers in three different sections. In one section, authors investigated Black workers' participation in the US economy. The next section explored their representation, advancement, and experience in the workplace. Finally, the researchers identified key challenges that Black employees face in the private sector. In the United State alone, Black workers account for about 15 million, or 12%, of the 125 million private-sector workers; the overall Black labor force is about 20.6 million. Almost 11.6 million, or 60%, of Black workers are concentrated in the southern portion of the United States. McKinsey & Company discovered that over 45% of Black private-sector employees reside in three industries: healthcare, retail, and food service; these industries have the highest shares of employees that are making less than \$30,000. McKinsey & Company continue to report that there is a significant drop-off in representation in management levels, where only 7% of Black workers hold a managerial position. Thus, it is apparent that more Black workers are in jobs and occupations with less opportunity for advancement and leadership positions, and they hold

fewer leadership positions than any other race, especially in regions like the North and the Midwest (Hancock, Manyika, Williams, Wong, & Yee, 2021).

In most leadership research, race is usually isolated to assess the influence of other variables, like managerial abilities or performance ratings. Utilizing race in this way helps demonstrate how leaders are viewed and evaluated within organizations (Eagly & Chin, 2010), how race affects leadership qualities (Shore et al., 2009), and how the race of lower-level employees in an organization impacts their views of the leadership (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008). These studies concluded that BIPOC leaders were viewed less positively than their White counterparts. Thus, race can be a constraint that translates into a constant restriction placed on BIPOC individuals in leadership positions.

Additionally, research in this area often compares White and Black individuals in leadership positions, typically with mixed results. For example, Sackett and DuBois (1991) demonstrated that Black leaders were rated more negatively, while Shore (2009) found that Black people in leadership positions were rated more positively. Still other studies, such as Ospina and Foldy (2009), noted an indifference to the race/ethnicity of leaders. Ospina and Foldy (2009) determined that many BIPOC leaders feel lack of professional acceptance, limited networks, isolation, and obstacles in exercising their authority. In addition, Black subjects described racism and challenges to their authority and that they were held to a higher standard than their white counterparts (Ospina & Foldy, 2009).

In recent leadership research, studies like Aronson and Dee (2012) and Kang and Inzlicht (2014) explored the effects of stereotype threats within organizations. A stereotype threat is anxiety or threat of confirming a negative stereotype about a social group (Casad &

Bryant, 2016). Hoyt et al. (2010) mentioned that when individuals, like BIPOC, face a stereotype threat, they are less likely to pursue and advance into leadership positions, especially when they are the only minority member of their work group. The authors continue to say that the threatening environment activates an aversion to risk, which is then coupled with uncertainty regarding success, which ultimately may cause them to forgo leadership positions (Hoyt et al., 2010).

Most research, like Sackett and DuBois's (1991), delves into other factors that might alter evaluations or expectations of BIPOCs in managerial positions. Shore et al. (2009) suggests that employees are more likely to rate leaders from their own racial group more favorably, and that employees who are not the same race as their managers typically evaluated the managers more negatively. Kraiger and Ford (1985) analyzed more than 50 articles that examined White and Black subjects, and they concluded that Whites rate other Whites higher and vice versa.

Davis and Maldonado (2015) recognized leadership studies have focused primarily on the White male point of view, further noting that research on BIPOC in leadership has been mostly ignored. According to Davis and Maldonado (2015) some scholars have studied Black leaders from a sociological perspective, but not many have researched how race has interacted to inform their leadership development. Research has identified that there exists a glass ceiling that serves as an invisible barrier to leadership advancement that may prevent BIPOC from achieving promotions and leadership opportunities (Nooks-Walter, 2008; United States Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

**Purpose Statement**

Previous leadership research and analyses have been objective and quantitative, yet quantitative leadership studies frequently fail to provide an understanding of the structures surrounding leadership. This study aimed to utilize qualitative methodology to explore the full depth of leadership and to help connect race and leadership research. The strength of qualitative data lies in its ability to gather narratives from those who have experienced a certain phenomenon to help enhance its application in research (Gold, 1997). Leadership studies that have been performed utilizing qualitative methods offer more ways to explore various leadership phenomena in-depth (Klenke, 2016).

This qualitative research study examined the experiences that contributed to BIPOC advancing into leadership positions across a variety of industries, like higher education, human resources, pharmaceutical, and library sciences. The perspective of the selected interviewees offered insights to share meaning about their professional narratives in leadership via a semi-structured interview process.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions helped to guide this study:

RQ1: How do BIPOC define leadership?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of leadership among BIPOC?

RQ3: What experiences influenced BIPOC to seek leadership advancement?

RQ4: What were the systems in place that supported and/or hindered leadership opportunities for BIPOC?

## METHODOLOGY

Extensive research has been published that brings attention to the barriers BIPOC have endured, which obstruct their advancement into leadership positions (Cook & Glass, 2014; Davis & Maldonado; Ospina, S., & Foldy, 2009), yet little to no research has occurred to address BIPOC who have successfully advanced into leadership positions. To help bridge that gap in the literature, this qualitative study utilized phenomenological qualitative methods, which focuses on understanding and providing a description of an experience as it is/was perceived by the individual that has lived through the moment (Klenke, 2016).

Meaning cannot be obtained through the assessment of numerical data surrounding the statistical relationship between the variables that exist in quantitative research (Creswell, 2013). Rather than utilizing numbers and figures, phenomenological research allowed the researcher to better answer the research questions involved gaining a clearer understanding of participant knowledge and perspectives. The phenomenological qualitative method was utilized to explore individual experiences. Phenomenology is used to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of experiences that were lived through the participants. Using this method allowed the researcher to ask questions that addresses what is was like for the interviewees to live through their journeys into leadership. For example, one of the questions that was asked during the interviews was “What was your first experience in leadership?” This question was posed to gain a better understanding of where the participants first started their ascension into leadership. The present study conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews, involving in-person, audio telephone, or virtual interviews, using open-ended questions to obtain lived experiences from participants (Creswell, 2013; Klenke, 2016)

## **Participants**

To obtain meaningful feedback, previous research has determined that the number of participants for phenomenological qualitative studies varies between three and ten individuals (Creswell, 2013). To ensure that the richness of data generated both depth of content and credibility, the goal was to recruit ten participants. Due to timing and the requirements of the study, the researcher recruited five individuals that met the requirements, and was unable to reach saturation. Data saturation occurs when there are no themes or information that was not observed in previous interviews. (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). Though saturation was not met, these five participants were able to provide their experiences that provided a better understanding to the proposed research questions, and provide material for future research.

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received, participants were recruited through purposeful or purposive sampling, which allowed the researcher to select subjects that are knowledgeable and have leadership experience while being BIPOC (Palinkas, 2013). Potential participants had to be at least 18 years or older, self-identify if they are in a leadership position, and self-identify as BIPOC. Participants were recruited through listservs, such as the American Psychological Association and the National Communication Association listservs, and through professional social media, such as LinkedIn. If the individual was interested in participating, they were directed to fill out a demographic survey on Qualtrics (Appendix A) which included a place for their contact information and an electronic consent form. There were eight individuals that fit the criteria of the study and indicated that they would like to participate in an interview. Three of the eight participants were recruited from personal relationships with the researcher; these

participants were selected because they enhanced the understanding the research questions that were posed (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016). After sending out a recruitment email that provided more information about the study, method of data collection, and time commitment, five participants responded back with a continued interest in the study.

A demographic questionnaire was emailed to the five interested participants. The study participants interviewed included two Black females, one Asian American female, one Hispanic male, and one Hispanic female. Three of the five participants were single, one was widowed, and the other was married. Three of the subjects came from a nuclear family, and the other two subjects came from a household with a missing parent. Three subjects had zero siblings, one participant had two siblings, and one subject had five siblings. Three participants had zero children, one participant had three children, and one participant had six children. One participant had a high school diploma with some completed college, one participant was in the process of completing their Master's, two of the participants were working towards their PhD, and one had a PharmD. The level of occupation between the participants ranged from coordinator/supervisor, clinical consultant, and chief operating officer. The industry types span from public, for profit, and not for profit, with industries that include human resources, pharmacy, higher education, and library sciences. Finally, the ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 57. Table 3.1 displays demographic information for all participants.



**TABLE 1: PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Siblings</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Highest Level of Education</b>	<b>Level of Occupation</b>
Charlie Jones	African American	F	55	Married	5	6	Masters	President
Devon Smith	African American	F	57	Other	0	3	Masters	Coordinator
Nicole Nelson	Asian	F	26	Single	0	0	Doctoral	Consultant
Brock Davis	Hispanic/Latino	M	24	Single	2	0	High School	Coordinator
Reese Miller	Hispanic/Latina	F	24	Single	0	0	Masters	Coordinator

**Data Collection**

There are two data sources for the present study: an advanced, demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) asked participants about their life history, helping to establish a baseline of information for the interview on topics related to past and current work experience and leadership advancement. The demographic questionnaire had nine questions that gathered the participant's life history, current position characteristics, race and gender implications, current and past family structure, and educational attributes. The questionnaire also helped contribute to the stories and experiences that were shared throughout the interview, like how the participant's siblings affected their encounters that influenced their leadership advancements.

The second mode of data collection were the semi-structured interviews. These began by ensuring the setting selected via Zoom or phone call was still appropriate and comfortable for the participants. The researcher attempted to build rapport with the participants by engaging in opening dialogue and delving more into the topics that the demographic questionnaire asked the interviewees. Successful interviews and an effective interview process included assuring that the participant is comfortable in providing their insights that help the researcher gain knowledge that help answer their research questions. To help build rapport, the researcher showed appreciation for the time volunteered, the participant's openness in sharing their experiences throughout the interview and staying open and adaptable in the experiences that participants shared while obtaining data.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between an hour to an hour and a half. Within that timeframe, the set interview questions provided latitude for discussion about the

participant's academic and professional backgrounds, their perceptions of race and gender and how those factors might have influenced their advancement, and what their current organization's efforts have been in their professional advancement. Additional questions emerged throughout the course of interviews that the interviewees may have perceived that have attributed to their leadership advancement, like the recent pandemic. Utilizing the semi-structured interview style allowed the researcher to ask each participant a list of preestablished questions with opportunities to delve deeper beneath the surface responses to obtain meaning that the participants assign to their own situations and the complexities of behaviors and attitudes (Klenke, 2016). At the end of the interview, participants were asked to pass the study information on to others they identify as BIPOC leaders, using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling utilizes participants to connect the researcher to other individuals with similar experiences to take part in the study (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017).

Data collected during the study were kept confidential on a password protected computer to minimize risks. Participants' pertinent information was saved electronically with a pseudonym, and any identifying data was kept separately from collected data in a folder in a locked office on university property. Pseudonyms were developed to protect to participants as best as possible, including the organizations that participants are a part of and any identifiable information that relates to the interviewees. The participants that were audio recorded with their permission and were later transcribed. Any handwritten notes, personal notes, or memos were used for the researcher's recall will be destroyed at the end of the project. Any quotes attributed are identified by pseudonym. Access to the data files was restricted to the researcher, a thesis advisor, and a committee member. Consent to

confidentiality was provided through the consent page on the demographic survey via Qualtrics.

### **Data Analysis**

After interviewing participants, the researcher used an automated transcription system to transcribe the interviews. Once transcribed, the data were transformed from raw data into statements and claims to assist coding data into themes and categories after reading transcripts from the interviews, memos and notes that were taken throughout the interview, and listening to the interview recordings (Creswell, 2013). Statements and meanings from the participants were transformed into clusters of themes and units from each interview. A unit in qualitative research is a word, phrase, sentence, or a paragraph that describes a phenomenon that the researcher is looking for throughout the research. After highlighting a unit, the research gives it a name, or a code. With the statements and meanings drawn from the interviews, the researcher charted themes that emerged and reviewed them collectively across all participants, which is common in qualitative research. Table 2 displays all the themes and subthemes.

According to Creswell (2013), the process of data analysis involves regarding the data that was collected that was seen, heard, and read by the research to determine what they have learned and help make sense of the participant's experiences. Categories were developed based on the sorting and the coding of the data analysis to review broad information and organized it into more specific sub-categories of patterns, themes, and comparisons to help the researcher better understand the narratives that were voiced from the participants.

For participant members' checking of the interview, the transcript and codes were provided to the interviewees electronically. Clarification occurred via email as participants offered potential edits to their transcribed interview analysis. For example, Brock offered more background information to one of his experiences that helps explain one of his stories and his motive in continuing his quest for advanced leadership positions.

**TABLE 2: THEMES AND SUBTHEMES**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family and Community Influences</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Training</li> </ul>
Initiation and Hard Work Due to Racism	N/A
Negativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insecurity</li> <li>• Anger and Frustration</li> </ul>

### **Data Coding**

The coding determined the themes and patterns to help the researcher comprehend and build theoretical explanations. Part of the goal while coding the data was to be open to hearing and learning about the narratives and perspectives of the participants and their journey to leadership advancement. Themes from the interviews were identified and then sorted into reoccurring clusters, which were then be sorted into higher order clusters. For example, there were over one hundred themes, like absent parent or twin sister, that were discovered when transcribing the participants' interviews. Those themes were then sorted into clusters, like family structure, which were commonalities between the interviews and the experiences that were shared. From there, the clusters were compared to one another to find commonalities. These commonalities were some of the overarching themes that are discussed throughout this study, like family and community influences. Themes were distinguished

from those clusters and then sorted into findings, like preparation. General impressions and searching for themes were validated via the repetition of reemergence of specific ideas and experiences throughout all interviewees, like emotions that the participants felt during their narration, the events that shaped their leadership experiences, and the different values that the subjects feel that are important in leadership. For example, one of the participants felt that being a stay-at-home mother helped her develop empathy, which they feel is essential in a leadership role. The author utilized three different coding strategies to help identify the main themes throughout the interviews: attribute coding, affective coding methods, and values coding. The author will provide a brief description of each of the coding strategies that were employed throughout the study.

Attribute coding is typically applied in the beginning of interviews and focus groups rather than embedded within it (Saldana, 2009). This type of coding is also known as descriptive coding, which is usually employed when discussing various themes that emerged from the beginning of interviews when building rapport, like what the participant's current job is. The basic demographic information, like fieldwork setting (school, job information, city, or county), participant characteristics or demographics (race, gender, ethnicity, or religion), and other variables of interest were coded using attribute coding. Demographic coding provides essential participant information and contexts for analysis and interpretation. Saldana (2009) reports this coding style as information that should be included in codes that identify types of activities that appear in the data set for future categorizations and explorations of interrelationship. For example, the researcher identified themes like job information, family background, leadership background, and demographic information.

Affective coding method was the next coding strategy that the researcher employed to help develop themes and clusters. Affective coding methods investigate subjective qualities of participant's experiences, like the emotions, values, conflicts, and judgments by directly acknowledging and naming those experiences. Affective qualities are core motives for actions that individuals perform, their reactions, and interactions; these should not be discounted from trying to understand narratives that participants provide. Emotion coding, a subsection of affective coding, labels the feelings that the participants describe throughout the interview (Saldana, 2009). Some of the codes that emerged from affective coding were enjoyment, confident, impactful, challenging, and struggle.

The third and final coding method that was applied for identifying themes was values coding. Values coding is the application of codes that reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs that represent their perspectives or worldview. Though each construct has a different meaning, values coding incorporates all three. Saldana (2009) breaks down each of the three: a value is the importance individuals attribute to themselves, another person, thing, or idea. An attitude is the way participants feel and think about themselves, another person, thing, or idea. On the other hand, a belief is part of a system that includes values and attitudes, plus personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretable perceptions of the world. There is complex interplay, influence, and affect between all three constructs that manifest themselves in thought, feeling, and action, according to Saldana (2009). Values coding is effective for studies that are exploring culture values and beliefs systems, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences, critical ethnographies, and longitudinal qualitative studies. Incorporating all three methods of coding

provided the researcher with codes that the participants felt like captured their narratives correctly.

In addition to the data analysis and identification of themes, to help promote the trustworthiness of data, various strategies were used to enhance the accuracy of the themes and findings. This is, in essence, the qualitative response to reliability and validity. Through member checking, the researcher ensured there is no reflectivity or biases that would threaten the trustworthiness of the research. Member checking is a technique that helps explore the credibility of the data. Member checking covers a range of activities like returning the interview transcripts to the participant, a member check focus group, or returning analyzed synthesized data (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). This study utilized a returned analyzed and synthesized data form of member checking.

Credibility in qualitative research is promoted when researchers consciously establish procedures for accuracy during the duration of the study. Bias could occur, centered in the researcher's beliefs, values, and perceptions. Trustworthiness and member checking serve as strategies to check for accuracy during the study and addresses concerns of researcher bias and reactivity, which is considered a threat in conducting qualitative research and have been identified as factors that could lead to inaccurate and biased conclusions. The consideration of concerns in qualitative research promotes a study of integrity (Creswell, 2014). With utilizing member checking, the researcher used the feedback from the participants and peers to improve data analysis and interpretation credibility.

Additionally, to promote trustworthiness and credibility, it is crucial to participate in reflexivity throughout the research process. Reflexivity is the process of examining one's assumptions and preconceptions about the research questions throughout the research process



(Hsiung, 2010). The primary researcher is a White, cis-female in her mid-twenties with less than five years of leadership experience. The researcher holds the belief that leadership positions should be filled by who can perform the job more successfully, and not on racial profiling, while recognizing the immense barriers that BIPOC individuals face in advancing their careers.

## **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this research was to understand how BIPOC leaders achieved success, with the goal of connecting race and leadership research, using qualitative methodology to explore their leadership success. Further, this research examined if professional development programs existed within the organizations where participants are employed and if the programs influenced the advancement of these subjects into leadership positions. The research questions that helped guide this study were defining leadership, the perceptions of leadership, and the experiences that influenced the participants to seek leadership advancement. The study also explored different systems that are in place that supported or hindered leadership opportunities for the subjects.

Three predominant themes were observed from the interviews: leadership preparation, initiative, and negativity. There were several sub-themes that emerged from each theme. A majority of the experiences that the participants described can be tailored for more than one theme or sub-theme. Supporting data for all the research questions were intertwined with the themes and sub-themes with quotes or a summary of the interviewee's experience. Preparation, initiative and hard work due to racism, and negativity were three themes that were demonstrated throughout the interviews.

The manifestation of themes emerged after the analysis of participant experiences, based on the responses to a demographic questionnaire, and the responses during the semi-structured interviews. This chapter is divided into the following sections: (a): participant descriptions and pseudonyms; (b): phenomenological analysis; and (c): summary of phenomenological analysis. In the phenomenological analysis, the three themes are discussed

further. Two of the themes also had subthemes. For preparation, sub-themes include family and community, education, and professional development. Negativity also had sub-themes, like disconnection, frustration and anger, and dejected. The themes are revealed in greater detail along with participant data related to the key themes in the phenomenological analysis section

### **Participant Descriptions and Pseudonyms**

Each of the participants volunteered valuable time to share their personal experiences that led to their advancement into leadership positions, sharing meaningful experiences. Pseudonyms were utilized instead of actual names to ensure the participant's confidentiality; however, the actual professional titles were retained, in order to demonstrate that their leadership levels were supervisor or higher. As follows, the five volunteer participants that were interviewed as part of this research study are introduced below.

Charlie Jones's, an African American woman, experience in leadership originated when she was a young girl, growing up in segregated schools with her twin and her other siblings and attending church with her family. Her leadership experience commenced in her small family church, teaching Sunday school to her peers. According to Charlie Jones, her church leadership experiences influenced her to establish academic and professional goals and set out to work hard to achieve them. Charlie Jones has worked over 15 years in Corporate America as a technology services manager before changing careers to a more academic career that helps develops online courses for colleges. This participant oversees faculty members at the universities when they are designing online courses, builds servers and databases, and anything that relates to technology in the classroom. Additionally, Mrs. Jones serves on countless committees that make higher education decisions within her state

and also serves as a president of countless committees. Charlie Jones is in the midst of finishing her PhD in Educational Leadership. Finally, Charlie Jones is in the 45 to 57 age range, is the product of a two-parent home, has five siblings, six children, and is married. The age range in the participant description helps promote anonymity for the participants.

The next participant is Devon Smith, also an African American woman. She served as an adjunct professor since 2006 at a community college before chairing the Social Sciences Department, which is her current position. Devon was a substitute teacher for science in elementary schools and established a family before becoming an adjunct and making her way to the chair of the department. As the chair of the department, Ms. Smith supervises the adjuncts and professors, helps schedule courses, and teaches college courses. Devon also serves on many committees, like curriculum committees for the college; she is also the Senate President for the university where she teaches. Like Mrs. Jones, Ms. Smith is finishing her PhD in Educational Leadership with a focus in Community College. Devon Smith is in the 45 to 57 age range, is from a two-parent household, has no siblings, has three children, and is widowed.

The third participant that completed the interview process is Nicole Williams, an Asian American woman. For the past two years, Nicole Williams has served as a Clinical Consultant for a pharmaceutical company. She aids clients in managing their pharmaceutical benefits all over the United States. Nicole graduated with her Doctor of Pharmacy and Master of Business Administration a few months before beginning her current position as a consultant. She has over fifty clients that she oversees and is the youngest consultant that her organization has ever employed. Nicole is also part of an Inclusion and Diversity committee

that her organization aims to incorporate more of a diverse and inclusive community within the workplace. Nicole is in the 24 to 45 age range, comes from a single-parent household, has zero siblings, has zero children, and is single.

The only male participant, Brock Davis, who identifies as Hispanic/Latino, is a supervisor at a main branch of a library in the Midwest. He started at the library when he was a junior in high school and has stayed with the organization since then. He supervises 12 employees that range from customer service to technology assistants. Brock also completes the hiring for all seven different branch locations throughout his state. He is also on a diversity and inclusion committee that helps bring a more diverse culture to the library. Within this committee, he mentions that they want to have a culture that is inclusive to every patron and employee that the library serves. Brock Davis is in the 24 to 45 age range, comes from a single-parent household, has two siblings, has no children, and is single.

The last participant is Reese Miller, who also identifies as a Hispanic/Latina. Reese is currently in human resources for a company that helps with technology solutions for universities, financial institutions, smaller organizations, and corporate offices throughout the state she resides in. Reese supervises onboarding, new hire orientation, aiding new hires in their new roles, and helps implement organizational culture initiatives at all of the organization's locations. She is a rodeo queen, has previous human resource experiences from previous years, and has additional leadership experiences from the rodeo domain. Currently, Reese is finishing up her last year in an Industrial-Organizational Master's program. Reese Miller is in the 24 to 45 age range, is a product of a two-parent household, has no siblings, has no children, and is single.

Participants had some commonalities beyond race and leadership positions. The individuals that participated in this study have ties to organizational committees that are civic, social, or service-oriented. A majority of the participants were on some sort of diversity and inclusivity committee through the organizations that employ them. Also, two of the participants were heads of committees that were outside of their organizations, like sitting on a higher education committee or being the President of a Senate committee. Membership and involvement within these organizations have allowed BIPOC and other diverse members to work alongside like-minded individuals with different experiences to promote and receive the development of knowledge, skills, abilities as well as gain networking opportunities

Additionally, all the participants shared involvement in other professional groups that are specific to their professional areas of employment, study, and expertise. Involvement in community and professional groups added to the experiences of the interviewees as the engagements offered them access to networks of other connections, trainings, committee participation, and accepting took on leadership roles, which the information shared via interview contributed to their experiences in leadership.

### **Phenomenology Analysis**

The current study utilized both a narrative and a phenomenological approach, which focuses on understanding and providing a description of an experience as it is perceived by the participant that have lived through the moment (Klenke, 2016), such as understanding how interviewees navigated the barriers that were in place when advancing into leadership positions. There were three major themes that were extracted from the analysis. Responses to the first two research questions: how do BIPOC define leadership and what are their perceptions of leadership? corresponded and elicited similar answers throughout all five

participants. Participant data indicated that defining leadership and their perceptions of leadership is a result of their own experiences. The third and fourth research questions: what experiences influenced participants to seek leadership advancement and what systems were in place that supported/hindered leadership opportunities? also provoked comparable answers across all the interviewees. Three interviewees indicated that workplace sponsored professional development opportunities had influenced them to seek leadership advancement. The other two had never experienced systems expressed and indicated that the lack of systems did not hinder their leadership opportunities. All participants indicated that they had other connections, development opportunities, and family that influenced leadership advancement.

The themes identified in this research were developed based upon participant experiences. Three predominant themes were revealed throughout the interviews: leadership preparation, initiative and hard work, and negativity. There were several sub-themes that emerged from each theme. Some participants' experiences may fit into more than one section. Supporting data for all the research questions were intertwined with the themes and sub-themes. For preparation, sub-themes include family and community, and education. Negativity also had sub-themes, like insecurity, and frustration and anger. The themes are discussed in greater detail along with participant data related to the key themes, beginning with preparation.

### **Preparation**

The essence of participant reflections is identified in both personal and professional experiences that were beneficial in their leadership advancement goals. These reflections allowed the participants to better position themselves for opportunities for both professional

growth and advancement. The participants had experiences, which build one upon another, before they became leaders. The preparation for leadership advancement began many years before any of the five participants initiated/began their current leadership roles. In Reese Miller's interview, she narrated her experience as a rodeo queen:

“...I started horseback riding school when I was young, which directly led me to being a rodeo queen for the past five years. I have had the initiative to start multiple rodeo teams that include other rodeo queens from all over the United States. I have taken them to different national rodeos here in the United States and in Mexico...I have also started multiple projects within the Western industry.”

Participants noted that some influences were more intentional such as growing up with siblings, parenting, or membership in organizations, like religion, that gave insight and drive on what to do to accomplish goals. Other influences were incidental, like observing leaders and mentors on the job.

There were influences that family and community had on the participants that were early and more recent community involvement influences that left lasting impressions on all of the participants. There were also indirect and unintentional occurrences that happened on their leadership journey. For example, Charlie mentions that a past manager of hers introduced her to a friend of theirs. Years later, Charlie found her start in academia due to her connection with her previous manager's friend. The friend called her up and described how they had a position open that they thought Charlie would be suited for. However, the interviewees vocalized that more direct and intentional experience were more beneficial to the participants, like attending church with their family. The participants attributed a portion



of their success in their leadership advancement to family and community influences; family and community members modeled and displayed leadership qualities that paved the road for the participants. There were three sub-themes that emerged from participant interviews, as contributors to their preparation into leadership roles: family and community influences, education, and training. The exploration starts with family and community influences.

**Family and Community Influences.** Parents, siblings, grandparents, and community leaders have had an influence on participants in their leadership advancement. The influence in each participant's preparation for leadership occurred both through spoken narratives or lived examples. Examples were offered from interviewees who shared family and community experiences that influenced their desires to be where they are today. There was more than one avenue of influence that provided leadership models and lessons for the participants, which include parents, siblings, grandparents, community leaders, and participation in those organizations.

Both Charlie Jones and Devon Smith contributed vivid accounts of learning qualities and the importance of leading early in their lives by watching parents and other community members at church services and providing services to others in their churches. Both participants recounted learning leadership qualities that motivate individuals, collaborating with others to accomplish a shared goal, and understanding issues in leadership that prohibit teams from accomplishing their goals. Charlie Jones's involvement at a Southern Baptist church with her family from her youth were an integral part of her foundational understanding of leadership. Mrs. Jones shared:

“...leadership started with me in this small family church...there was a special

service where we were serving food and we had to make plates, or there's an assembly line. So, in this assembly line, everybody learns their duty and their leadership...I've benefited from leadership because I walk into a room and I, uh, automatically go this organization mode of bringing clarity to confusion.”

Leadership lessons and traits were obtained from observing family members and community members demonstrating characteristics of leadership, like what was observed from Charlie Jones's involvement. Devon Smith also grew up in a Southern Baptist church with her family. Ms. Smith relates to her upbringing in a segregated environment and explains how her youth has influenced her leadership advancement:

“...it may be a little different for me. As a young person, I grew up...in a segregated school. My twin sister and I started school, we were always in a segregated or a non-segregated environment...there was a little bit of a different treatment, but because at home, there was a big structure and I grew up in a small church with my family, and that's where my experience started, in this small, Baptist church in Texas with my family by my side”

Family and community influences also encouraged the interviewees to establish plans to being prepared for leadership. All of the participants participated in at least one leadership course either offered by their organization or as part of a higher education program. In Brock's interview, he describes taking a leadership course offered at the library. He mentions that his coworkers influenced him to take the course and that the course “prepared me for real jobs, including the role I am currently in.” Brock's leadership journey started in high school when he participated in a program that allowed him to work at the library in his high school.

This program in his high school influenced his decision to continue working in library sciences. Family and community influences encouraged the remaining participants to establish plans to being prepared for leadership in obtaining a higher degree.

**Education.** Participants identified their own experiences of diligence and commitment to learning and absorbing knowledge to be prepared for leadership advancement. The pursuit of education was promoted by family and community influencers, like ancestry, pastors, and volunteers. Additional motivators for the pursuit of education included personal interests, competitiveness in the workforce, and to serve as examples to others that barriers can be overcome. Participants noted that they were academically equipped for advancement into leadership opportunities, wherein they worked relentlessly to prove their leadership capabilities.

Four out of the five participants either had or were working toward higher education degrees. Both Devon Smith and Charlie Jones are pursuing PhDs in educational leadership; whereas Reese Miller holds a master's in industrial organizational psychology and Nicole Nelson holds a doctorate in pharmacy. Nicole shared that her mother also has a PhD and a Master of Social Work, or MSW, noting that her mother also inspired her to continue to work in the healthcare field. Nicole Nelson recounts that majority of what she learned about leadership was learning by observing her mother:

“...I would say that a lot of what I have learned, I've learned just by witnessing my mom... She has always worked in the healthcare field, and she has been a predominant female leader in this industry. Just witnessing some of her struggles with sexism, and the fact that she has a PhD and an MSW...I see some of those struggles

and hearing about them and then experiencing that myself where people question if I actually have a Doctor of Pharmacy, of if my degree was worth it...I think my degree and witnessing what my mom went through has helped prepare me for my current consultant job.”

Nicole often consults with her mother, who was her professional influence, and mapped out the work experiences and position progression she has needed to help her pursue a variety of positions in different states. Nicole’s journey to leadership advancement to progressive advancement within her current company has required her to move to a variety of states, from New York to New Jersey to finally Florida. Nicole’s current occupation allows her to work from home. Moving closer to her mother was an important factor when accepting her current consultant role with the same company her mother is a Vice President for.

Other participants also shared similar experiences with their family and education. Reese Miller was born and raised in a rodeo family out west. She mentioned that her father was her biggest influence in moving states to pursue a master’s degree, stating “...being born into a well-known family in the Western industry, it was important that I follow in my father’s footsteps. But I wanted more than to be in the Western world...and my father understood and supported me 100% with whatever I decided.”

Reese continued on to describe that her father supported her finding a school that fit her needs in the south. With her father’s support, Reese enrolled in a master’s program that allowed her to find her current position at a tech industry. In a few months, Reese will graduate and plans on moving to a more urban city to find a consulting job that will also allow her to continue in her current role within the Western industry.

In contrast to the other two participants, Devon had a more challenging time with finding herself in her leadership experience. Devon considers herself a “late bloomer” in education, as a non-traditional student and employee. Before she married and had children, Devon recounts being interested in STEM, and how her interests changed after getting married and having children. After these life changing moments, she decided her interests were with history education. She described her experiences of being told that she could not get into a program after her bachelor’s degree:

“I attended college before I settled down and was interested in STEM, but after staying at home and starting a family and homeschooling my kids, I saw my interests have changed. When I went back to school, I ended up majoring in history education. In my senior year, I went to a job fair at my college where somebody told me that I couldn’t get into graduate school. And I was like, really? I can’t do that? And then I did. I got a master’s degree and later I went on to work on a PhD in educational leadership with an emphasis on community college.”

Devon mentions that her drive to prove that individual incorrect led her to where she is today. She started off as a faculty member in her department and is currently the chair for the social science department. She recalls that doubt being the most significant moment in her leadership journey that has shaped who she is and where she ultimately ended up.

Along with Devon, Charlie also expressed that she was a late bloomer in education. Beginning her career in corporate America, Charlie had a long commute that took her away from her children and spouse. When she left corporate America, she found herself at a university as a research specialist in the IT field. Her new position allowed her to have a

shorter commute, shorter work hours, and was the foot-in-the-door for her current position as the director for the center for instructional innovation and technology services. Charlie noted that current position is one of the many reasons she is completing her PhD saying, "...I'm working on finishing the degree to accomplish the goal of being at the drawing board, the table, when we're talking technology, so we can be more successful for future students." Though both Charlie and Devon did not follow the traditional educational path, they both worked to be in academic leadership.

**Training.** Professional development program experiences within the workplace are a leadership advancement component thought to be valuable in being strategically prepared for career advancement. The participants provided insights regarding the availability of work sponsored programs to help them build competence in work specific areas to develop and equip them as high potential talent. The experiences that were shared by Charlie and Nicole mirrored each other. Each of their organizations have a program that provides new hires a mentor. For example, at Charlie's organization she recalls there being a program that mentored minorities, allowing the organization to encourage them to consider their leadership skills and potential. Charlie remembers a time where she was a mentor to an African American female employee that reminded Charlie of herself:

"...there was a young lady, she was a student worker, then she was a graduate assistant of ours. She was assigned to the department, but I took it upon myself to mentor her. She reminded me so much of myself. I helped her see what I saw; a young, successful leader. I showed her what she needed to know to be successful. She is now in corporate. We send Christmas cards to each other every year!"

Reese Miller expressed a similar concept that her organization does as well. Instead of providing new employees with mentors, her company has a meeting once every month, called coaching sessions:

“...they’ve taught me a lot about what the real work environment is like. Through the coaching sessions, they have shown me their day-to-day routine, this is why we do it. In the coaching sessions, it’s both professional and personal. My manager sets personal goals and professional goals, they do a lot of personal development as well as professional development. It is a practice I wish more organizations implemented.”

Participants, like Reese, have displayed an interest in having organizations implement mentor programs by either participating in one or having heard about them. Through training, education, and family and community influences, the participants have discussed a variety of ways that they felt have prepared them the best for their leadership positions. Family and community influences have encouraged the participants to continue to face the barriers that have stopped them from succeeding into leadership positions. The subjects have sought out higher education, trainings, and other preparation sources to help them ascend into leadership roles.

### **Initiative and Hard Work due to Racism**

Family, community, education, and training had an influence on all of the participant’s preparation and overall leadership experience, but participants mentioned that initiative and hard work was a factor as well. Parents, grandparents, educators, mentors, and leaders in BIPOC communities taught the participants what they should do to be prepared for their journey in leadership, including racism that they would experience. Participants

disclosed the feeling that there would be greater work output expectations of them as BIPOC, and that they felt as if they were under a spotlight that made them work harder. Participants also vocalized that they felt like they had to work harder than white counterparts to prove their abilities or to even obtain a job interview. Devon Smith was upfront and acknowledged that:

“I think being a person of color and also being a woman, there are certain expectations of a leader, that’s from an underrepresented group. We are a double minority, and we’re expected to work harder. I think it [leadership positions] takes us longer to navigate, especially being a woman of color. It takes us longer to into those leadership positions. Once we’re in those positions we still face the challenge of people thinking that we got there by other means of our abilities, like a quota that needs to be met.”

Charlie Jones mirrored Devon’s narrative mentioning that people of color have to “work harder.” As an example, Charlie recounted being a new employee at an organization, and walking into a meeting where questions would be asked, and though Charlie would answer them, but nobody in the meeting would recognize her answers until someone else shared the same thing. Charlie also continued by saying that when she first started in corporate America, she had to change her appearance to be more “white”:

“...you have to assimilate to [whiteness] to be heard...I remember first starting my corporate job that I thought about cutting my hair, perming my hair as we call it, making my hair straight to fit in...I came from this mindset that I’m not enough or before I’m accepted in this rule, my hair has to be straight and look like a white



person.”

Charlie and Devon were not the only ones that reported having racist experiences in their respective organizations. Several participants discussed responding to racism by “working harder” to demonstrate professional competence and leadership abilities rather than filing an internal complaint or pursuing an external legal filing. Both Charlie and Devon verbalized that they had to work harder, outperform, and excel beyond the White, male colleagues who were not only unwelcoming and unprofessional, but also stereotyped and openly discriminated against them for showing up and performing their jobs. Charlie shared, “If my name is ethnic to my community, people may see it as ghetto and a secretary could put my resume on the bottom of the stack just because of my name. I would not be surprised if that has not happened to me.”

Nicole disclosed that she learned her professionalism and work ethic from her mother, saying that whenever she had to present in front of peers or an audience, she would diligently practice until she was prepared and had a script memorized. She went on to say that “there’s a little bit more of a struggle to prove that I am an expert in what I’m talking about, but I have to work ten times as hard as other employees to get that message across.” She also continues to say that “I don’t automatically get the respect my other coworkers receive, I have to earn that respect, which is kind of stupid because I already earned it with my degree.” Nicole continued to share that her anger and frustrations made her work harder to be good at her job. Nicole was unknowingly facing the model minority myth, which suggests that Asian American and Pacific Islanders, or AAPIs, have higher work ethics, are well-educated, and do not face the barriers into leadership as other BIPOC did. She

mentioned that it was a battle for a long time to remember that perfection does not exist, saying that she combats some of the stereotypes and biases in her workplace by admitting when she makes mistakes and tries to be accountable, which has helped her over time. Similarly, Reese shared that she had to volunteer to demonstrate that she could be a successful student and still have leadership roles in the Western industry.

While her peers and leaders above her did not take on volunteer tasks, Devon served as a president of her college's committee, led board members through meetings, and participated on several academic committees. She believed if she did not accept these additional responsibilities, she would be perceived as not being a team player. Devon shared a time when she discovered that she was the only female and only person of color present on one of her committees:

“...I was looking at past presidents of this organizations and said ‘there’s never been a female, person of color as a president. And I thought I’m going to change that. And this year, I am now the president... There are organizations where people are open, someone has to say ‘I want to run. I want to be a part of this.’ As a person of color, we can’t sit back and say ‘Oh, that’s a shame’ and not try for those leadership positions.”

Charlie's experiences partially aligned with Devon's. Charlie took it upon herself to perform well and prepare, in order to demonstrate her value, especially since she was a “late bloomer” in academia. For example, Charlie shared a story about a former White, male president who was responsible for leadership and inclusion and diversity. She mentioned that he was not equipped to address or impact change for underrepresented populations. The lack

of attention and resources caused a decline of retention for BIPOC students. While lack of attention and resources caused a decline, external stereotypes and biases by other individuals was also a factor in retention among BIPOC.

The interviewees mentioned the feeling that they perceived greater work output expectations of them as BIPOC. These expectations made them work harder than their white counterparts and take on extra roles, like volunteering for committees or running for officer positions, in order to prove their skills and abilities in the workplace or to obtain a job interview. Participants noted that there were stereotypes and biases that were present for them in their workforce that added an extra barrier to their leadership journey. Four out of five participants disclosed specific experiences and narratives that explored the extra work that they participated in.

### **Negativity**

Through all of the interviews there was negative emotion surrounding their narratives, including insecurity or frustration and anger. Whenever a participant was about to share a more pessimistic or adverse experience, their voices would become rough and they would not look directly at the researcher, almost as if they were ashamed that they were about to share this experience. For example, this happened when Charlie was explaining a time when she had to change her wording on an email in case it was perceived as hard.

“...I constantly re-evaluate decisions before I do something. There’s a point where you’re, as a leader, you write this long email and you’re reprimanding someone. After I write this email, I go back and I soften it and am more empathetic to the person. As an African American leader, I have to remember the stereotypes and biases that are

present. Often, African Americans are seen as loud and pushy. I try to avoid those stereotypes in the simplest tasks, like writing emails. It seems silly for an outsider, but it's something I'm used to doing.”

Though the interviewees attributed some of their successful advancement to their negative experiences, like experiencing stereotypes and biases, it was clear that there were indirect and unintentional consequences that negatively impacted the participants. The narratives that were communicated left lasting impressions on the participants. In particular, there were two sub-themes that emerged from the interviews that demonstrate the negative feelings: insecurity, and frustration and anger.

**Insecurity.** The exploration of negative emotions continues with insecurity. Participants discussed insecurity in terms of being uncertain about their place in their leadership roles. Brock expressed that he still has periods of insecurity; he prefaces his narrative that he is part of a single-parent household with two sisters that still live at home with him and his mother.

“...I was the first one in my family to graduate high school, and I will be a first-generation college student. All throughout high school and at my current job, I still get self-conscious that I am not prepared enough. That I lack some knowledge or ability that my other coworkers have that I do not. I am the only person at my job that has [only] a high school diploma, others have at least a bachelor's.”

Brock continued to say that “knowing I am successful at my job fuels me to continue” at his job and future schooling.

Nicole is the only participant with two higher education degrees. The other

participants had one degree or were working on a higher degree than what they have already accomplished. The other participants shared that they felt as if their degrees helped prove that they had the qualifications for their leadership position. Other participants voiced that their coworkers, managers, clients, and even themselves made them feel insecure. Charlie voiced that the biggest barrier that existed for her to advance into leadership was herself:

“...to me, the biggest barrier is self-confidence...I would walk into a room and would stop in the midst of sitting down and would constantly ask myself “Am I good enough to be here with these people? And then I would think that there was this double layer to it. Is it because of the way I look and my credentials or is it because of something else?”

Charlie felt like an imposter, and she felt both anger and frustration from feeling insecure. Notably, at some point in each of the interviews, the participants would question themselves and their capabilities. Charlie continued to mention that she was angry at herself for feeling like that; she was given that position because she was prepared and had the skills needed to be successful in that position. Anger and frustration were paired with insecurity in almost all of the experiences the participants shared.

**Frustration and Anger.** Negative emotions, like frustration and anger, were shared and displayed throughout the interviews. Having to work harder, especially in academia, since they were a person of color angered Devon and Charlie. Charlie discussed a time when a colleague from another department had waited until the end of a project to contact her for help, and she remembers a sense of frustration from not being at the beginning of the project:

“...the bigger challenges, specifically being in higher education, is the frustration of

not being at the table. There are times when I get projects, the moment I get it, I know you're contacting me at the end of the project, asking me a fundamental question, but I should have been at the table the inception of the project to help ask question to help you think about what's best for the students."

Devon voiced the same frustration as Charlie did about sitting at the table from the beginning of a project. She recounts an experience similar to that of Charlie's at her university. Devon mentioned that there are always a "certain type of individual" at the table, and it should not be like that. There should be a wide variety of leaders when discussing projects, funding, and grants that affect the students. Devon shared:

"...leadership has primarily consisted of a certain group at the table. There were times where I wasn't at the table, and I should have been. When you look around and everybody at the table looks like you and thinks like you and talks like you, you don't even consider that there are others that would like to be, and should be, at that table. It frustrates me...my university could help so many students if they allowed different people at that table."

Nicole also voiced some frustration at her leadership journey, which was fueled by stereotypes and biases. Nicole was the only AAPI that was interviewed and shed some light on how those perceptions have affected her personally and professionally:

"...being Asian is different because Asian stereotypes are typically thought of as positive. Like you're so good at math. Of course you work a corporate job. Of course, you're an engineer or a med student or an architect or even a pharmacist. However, what people don't realize, even though it's positive, it puts a lot of pressure on us to

be successful, and it frustrates me...everybody has their eyes on me, and I was a different race, so I needed to be good at my job. And I wasn't. The pressure got to me. It made me angry. I strived to be this ideal, perfect person that literally doesn't exist."

Nicole explained that she still gets questions about her doctorate in pharmacy, and is regularly questioned about whether she is an actual pharmacist despite having her degree in her office and her pharmacy identification number on her certificate. She expressed her own frustration with this, saying, "I didn't go to school and take boards for six years to be questioned if I was a pharmacist."

Throughout all five interviews, participants displayed or expressed negativity towards some of their experiences in their ascension into leadership roles and positions. The interviewees did attribute some of the advancement to their negative experiences and emotions, like racism, biases, and stereotypes. Throughout the exploration of the negativity, there were two sub-themes that emerged: insecurity, and frustration and anger. The negative emotions and moments that the interviewees voiced left a lasting impact and impression on the individuals.

### **Summary of Phenomenological Analysis**

The experiences of leadership positions that the participants shared were varied, yet there were similarities between each experience. While the journey to leadership was completely different and distinctive to each of the participants, the data revealed three common themes and multiple subthemes. The research questions asked the interviewees about their definition and perceptions of leadership, experiences that influenced them to seek leadership advancement, and the systems that helped or hindered their leadership

opportunities. The data revealed preparation, initiative and hard work, and negativity as the overarching themes that captured that narratives the participants shared. There were also four sub-themes that were elements of the key themes that influenced the participants to take leadership positions. The first theme was preparation, with two sub-themes that emerged from the main theme which included family and community influences, and education. The second theme was initiative and hard work. The third theme that was discovered was negativity with two sub-themes: insecurity, and frustration and anger.

There were significant experiences and reasoning behind why the participants were influenced to seek leadership advancement. Some interviewees responded to not having workplace professional development that influenced them to advancement into leadership. Other participant experiences varied with development that was offered in the workplace; participants had workplace professional developed that influenced their success.

Preparation, the first theme, was a factor that influenced their journey into leadership roles. Family and community influences and education were both sub-themes to preparation. All five participants had data demonstrating that they were strategic in their efforts to advance at different points in their journey, influenced by family and involvement with community organizations. Four out of the five participants had sought and attained degrees of higher education. Through their jobs or education, all of the participants had the opportunity of professional development.

The second key theme was initiative and hard work. Participant data fully supported its emergence, even if data from each participant did not support this theme. The data revealed that all of the participants shared feelings of working harder than others to advance



to their current leadership roles. Advancement into leadership occurred through a series of identified experiences that built upon one another. No single experience led to leadership advancement, but rather the totality of the participants' varied experiences contributed. The experiences might have been varied, but there were some negative emotions that were displayed in all of the interviews: insecurity and frustration and anger.

Negativity was the third and final theme that developed through the interviews. Two sub-themes were also discovered: insecurity and frustration and anger. All of the participants had at least one negative experience that was shared through the semi-structured interview. However, even in the positive narratives, they were underlined with a negative emotion that was either frustration and anger or a sense of insecurity. The participants were verbal in telling their experiences, but displayed louder nonverbal actions, like not making eye contact or fidgeting when telling stories that were filled with insecurity or frustration and anger. All five participants displayed one of these emotions. The negative emotion led a few participants to work harder, especially in completing their higher education degree.

## **DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight from the leadership experiences of people of color. The research also aimed to help connect current race and leadership research. To help explore and achieve this, the current study examined the professional development that the participants took part in, and to explore if these programs influenced their advancement into leadership positions and roles. The data that were collected answered the research questions that were posed. The themes that were found were consistent with what research has displayed in recent leadership articles.

The foundations of race have led to disparities between the preparation and occupational outcomes of BIPOC (Watkins, 2013), where Caucasians traditionally are in leadership positions, and BIPOC are in entry-level positions or labor-intensive industries (Villas, 2003). Research in relation to preparation is mainly focused on entry-level, trade education, and low-skilled occupations, which showed that preparation was not as needed. With the small number of articles that examine roles that are not entry-level, these authors suggest these roles start before BIPOC enter the workforce beginning with family and cultural influences and education (Duffy & Dik, 2009; Villas, 2003).

Throughout the narratives, the participants shared experiences where community members and family and education have shaped their preparation into a leadership position. Both Charlie and Devon shared accounts of family members and community members shaping their leadership experiences at a young age. Reese also discussed how community and the Western industry has shaped her leadership perceptions and experiences. Nicole was influenced by her mother, who has a MSW and a PhD, which compelled her to continue into

higher education for a pharmaceutical degree. Four out of the five participants have a higher education, which is consistent with the Hackett & Byars's (1996) article that mentions that BIPOC strive for a higher education with the belief that they have to work harder and overprepare to ascend into leadership positions.

All of the participants mentioned their willingness to work harder and take on extra tasks in their occupations to help them achieve leadership positions, however this was perceived as necessary to assist in their advancement. In Nicole's narrative, she describes one of her managers hovering over her work in the first six months of starting her new job. The unnecessary lingering over her work is considered a form of social undermining, which occurs when supervisors or other colleagues enact their negative biases through "petty tyranny" (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Social undermining in an organizational setting refers to a behavior or a pattern of behaviors, like hovering, that is intended to hinder the ability to establish and maintain work-related success, a favorable reputation, and to maintain position relationships (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), which leads to increased feelings of anxiety, irritability, and depression in BIPOC employees. Furthermore, undermining in employee-supervisor relations is associated with more emotional exhaustion (Gant et al., 1993).

From cutting their hair to taking on more responsibilities at work, all of the participants have voiced that they have had to try to be seen at work and receive recognition that they thought they deserved. Given the underrepresentation of BIPOC in professional settings and leadership positions, BIPOC expressed that they would not "fit in" in those settings, a perception that can increase stress and dissatisfaction (Lovelace & Rosen, 1996). Further, BIPOC that feel like they are more susceptible to attributional ambiguity and

stereotype threats. Attributional ambiguity refers to mistrust of the motives behind other people's treatment (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991); stereotype threat is the fear of confirming a negative stereotype threat about the intelligence or ability of an individual's race (Aronson & Dee, 2002). While there were no experiences or stories that were shared about attributional ambiguity, stereotype threats were present in the participants' narratives. In Charlie's story, she shared that she had to modify her behavior in an email to make sure that she was not confirming stereotypes about African Americans.

On the contrary, Nicole experienced the model minority stereotype, which is a unique experience of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) that suggests that all AAPI have the same perfect record academically and in their careers. AAPI have been stereotyped as being highly motivated overachievers who come from higher socioeconomic families (Clemetson, 2000), which is not always the case. In *Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (2015), the authors mention that AAPI individuals still face many obstacles in education; students are often seen as an "invasion" and their demeanors as "inscrutable". The author continues to note that AAPI individuals experience a glass ceiling in organizations and exclusions from business networks. AAPI make up about 5 percent of the population, while they make up far less than 1 percent of the members on boards of Fortune 500 companies. AAPI individuals are also hired more often in STEM fields, but no matter their qualifications, they are rarely considered for management positions. Many younger AAPI individuals have pursued occupations in STEM since they were rejected in other areas they would have preferred, such as the fine arts, humanities, and social sciences (Chou & Feagin, 2015).

Nicole mentioned that she was not the best at mathematics but felt as if she needed to be. She put in extra hours in studying and expressed that her teachers did not believe her when she asked for extra help. There are perceptions that AAPI have overcome barriers of racial discrimination, stereotypes, and more successful than other races (Suzuki, 2002). Suzuki (2002) mentions that AAPI are less likely to be in management positions than their white counterparts and experience the glass ceiling like other BIPOC individuals. AAPI have not yet reached full equality and still face barriers in advancing into leadership (Woo, 2000). The model minority stereotype has affected these barriers and has caused majority of research of glossing over the barriers for AAPI, making them easy to ignore or neglect in research. There is a growing concern among AAPI about subtle incidents of discrimination, like remarks about limited English proficiency or accusing students of cheating on exams. Suzuki (2002) mentions that the model minority, like ambiguity attribution and stereotype threats, can increase depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion in AAPI. Nicole's experiences in her leadership narratives displayed the model minority stereotype, and she voiced her frustration throughout her stories. Implications of the findings of the present study for race and leadership, the conclusion, and suggestions for future research, limitations, and final thoughts, follow below.

### **Implications for Race and Leadership**

Data from the United States Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) affirmed that a glass ceiling holds back BIPOC individuals from leadership opportunities and promotions. While civil rights laws and agencies have made an impact when issues arise, laws do not and have not been able to regulate in a manner to help BIPOC in the workplace who have not obtained an opportunity to rise into a leadership position. There also is not a plan or program

that prepares them for advancement in the near future.

Research about the experiences of BIPOC leaders is limited, has focused primarily on the White male point of view, and their opinions have been largely ignored in organizational settings. What research is out there is mostly quantitative with an emphasis on managerial ratings, comparison of White and Black individuals in leadership positions, and race is usually isolated to assess other variables, like abilities and skills of the occupation under observation. The qualitative research observes stereotype threats in organizations, biases, and the overall environment that BIPOC face. There are no research articles that explore the experiences that influence BIPOC to obtain leadership roles. To expand leadership literature, race must be considered when observing leadership experiences. Expanding literature, however, is not the first step in helping BIPOC achieve leadership positions.

Organizations and educational programs need to ask BIPOC what is needed to help them, versus presuming what is offered should be adequate or acceptable for those in underrepresented populations. For example, in Nicole and Charlie's organizations, they both have a mentor program. In all organizations and educational programs, mentors should be assigned to be mentors or sponsors for subordinates as a role in their job or position. Organizational leaders and educational programs should intentionally include this in underrepresentation populations by inviting them to networking events or hosting job fairs that are more targeted to these individuals. These leaders could go one step further by promoting or creating professional development programs to underrepresented populations that are seeking to becoming leaders.

Leaders and organizations must make diversity and inclusion a concerted effort as

part of their management essential functions for performance measures. Diversity and inclusion efforts should be updated routinely and should include efforts that are in place to help BIPOC advance into leadership positions within organizations. Organizations that receive government funds should also ensure leaders are being accountable for reaching affirmative action goals, upholding practices and policies that the organization has in place, and filling out proper documentation that the leader is doing so. Failure to demonstrate those policies should result in those organizations losing their government funding paying fines. All organizations, regardless of funding from the government, should have strict documentation that indisputably displays efforts of diversity and inclusions principles and policies that are instated throughout the entire organization.

As established earlier, leadership advancement barriers continue to exist for BIPOC. There are guidelines that exist on how to help BIPOC advance, but these guidelines too often fail to be implemented in organizations. Some advances have occurred, but they are not in line with the availability of the expanded workforce who is prepared academically and have work experience. Equal opportunity, diversity and inclusion guidelines, and other efforts to promote BIPOC advancement are only successful if everyone willingly supports and implements efforts to change current procedures. BIPOC and their advancement to leadership stand with each other and others in history who have chipped away at the glass ceiling and have used their voice to help others advance.

## CONCLUSION

The experience of leadership advancement was identified by shared experiences from the participants. Responses to the first two research questions: how do BIPOC define leadership and what are their perceptions of leadership? corresponded and elicited very similar answers throughout all five participants. Specifically, they all discussed that leadership included effectively motivating a group of individuals to a common goal or purpose. Participants defined leadership and their perceptions of leadership as a result of their own experiences and the education that they sought out. The third and fourth research questions about what influenced BIPOC to seek leadership advancement and the different systems that were in place for those advancements to happen displayed more diverse experiences that fully answered those questions.

Research questions three and four elicited the most information from participants. The findings revealed that there was not a single experience that impacted the participant's advancement, nor was there one singular experience that propelled the advancement of any subject into leadership positions. What is notable is that the totality of the experiences shared by each participant, influenced their journeys into advancement.

Barriers that prevent the advancement in the workplace for BIPOC exist. This research study contributes to the literature through gaining an understanding from the experiences of BIPOC who have advanced into leadership positions. This study provides insight needed to assess the lived experiences of the BIPOC participating in the study.



BIPOC have experienced fewer opportunities for advancement to leadership positions (Harlan & White, 1994) and opportunities to participate in workplace organization programs that provide and promote accessible opportunities for advancement. Barriers for BIPOC, like discrimination, bias and stereotypes in the workplace, and exclusion from social and informational networks, have been researched and have found a negative impact, hindering their efforts toward advancement in the workplace (Cook & Glass, 2014; Hancock, Manyika, Williams, Wong, & Yee, 2021). Understanding what research has identified as hinderances for the advancement of BIPOC may be relevant in relating how BIPOC have overcome those barriers and the experiences that they identify as promoting their ascension into leadership positions. Through this study, participants helped identify experiences that were hinderances for their advancement into leadership positions. The sum total of experiences of the BIPOC within this study demonstrated how they were equipped for leadership advancement, but often experienced racism that was difficult for them. These individuals created paths through their preparation, education, hard work, initiative, and negative experiences that drove them to where they are today.

### **Limitations**

This qualitative study sought to provide an overall exploration of the identity and career development of BIPOC in leadership positions. This study also provided a glimpse into the lived experiences and narratives of the participants. The primary limitation centers on the sample size. First, the study did not reach data saturation. Though the purpose of qualitative work is not generalizability, there is a clear need for more participants to understand the experiences across BIPOC. Another limitation is the gender spread; while the study captured experiences from women, there was only one male who participated. Finally,

there would also be a benefit to studying only one race/ethnicity to really delve into their experiences.

### **Future Research**

This study was conducted to collect data on a smaller scale to gain meaning. Though data saturation did not occur, this work serves as a preliminary analysis of BIPOC leadership experiences that can and should be expanded. Future research ought to explore more deeply the key themes, like preparation, and its influence in leadership for BIPOC. Additional research could also delve more deeply into the other themes and subthemes and their influences in leadership advancement among BIPOC. Finally, future research could look at the specific stereotypes and biases that BIPOC leaders face in organizations. All of these concepts and ideas for future research could also be conducted, comparing leadership advancement of BIPOC compared to that of White individuals in the same positions.

A qualitative study should also occur to interview only higher-level positions in a certain industry, like healthcare or higher education, or consider people who have been in their fields for a longer period of time. Other considerations for additional studies could focus solely on private sector or fortune 500 companies. Quantitative work could be developed to survey a significantly larger BIPOC population to explore leadership advancement from a statistical perspective and focus on the significance of the data versus the meaning of the experiences. These other potential studies will also add more literature and research to the miniscule amount of literature for BIPOC in a leadership position. Additional trustworthy data will provide additional insight to BIPOC seeking to advance into leadership position in particular industries that are studied.

**Final Thoughts**

The individuals who participated in this study provided a deeper meaning surrounding their individual experiences that led to their ascension into leadership roles and positions. This research study demonstrates the importance of reconsidering traditional thoughts that are expressed by White, male researchers. After conducting and assessing an advanced demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, three themes emerged that were similar across all three participants: preparation, initiative and hard work due to racism, and negativity. These themes outlined the experiences of the BIPOC individuals within this study, and how they were equipped for leadership advancement. The study participant data demonstrated their excellence in knowledge and their tenacity in establishing and reaching their goals in their careers and personal lives.

The BIPOC leader is the sum total of all of their lived experiences and narratives. They must display initiative to continue even when facing barriers and negative events that discourage them from continuing on in their adventures into leadership roles. The goal of this thesis is to help unravel barriers that others have faced in their ascension into leadership positions, as well as to make future leaders aware of some experiences that were faced by these participants. These participants have come along way and created a path that was not there for them. Through this thesis, other hopeful BIPOC will have a roadmap in creating their own path into their deserved leadership positions.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



ANGELO STATE UNIVERSITY  
College of Graduate Studies  
*Institutional Review Board*

Dr. Nicole Lozano  
Dept. of Psychology & Sociology  
Angelo State University San Angelo, TX 76909  
Dear Nicole:

The project that you submitted to the IRB with your student Abby McVay titled "*Experiences of People of Color in Leadership Roles*" was reviewed and approved by Angelo State University's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Research Subjects in accordance with federal regulations 45 CFR 46, categories F.6 and F.7 for expedited review.

This protocol has been approved effective October 26, 2020. If the study will continue past next year, please submit a notification of continuation at that time. Please note that any revisions to these approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. All unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others, and any unexpected adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

The approval number for your protocol is #LOZ-102620. Please include this number in the subject line of in all future communications with the IRB regarding the protocol.

Sincerely,  
Teresa

Teresa (Tay) Hack, Ph.D.  
Chair of the Institutional Review Board

*Dr. Teresa Hack, IRB Chair | ASU Station #11025 | San Angelo, Texas 76909  
Phone: (325) 486-6121 | Fax: (325) 942-2194  
Member, Texas Tech University System | Equal Opportunity Employee*

**APPENDIX B: IRB-APPROVED CONSENT DOCUMENT**  
**Angelo State University**  
**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**  
**Consent to Participate in an IRB-Approved Research Event**

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Project Title: The White Prototype: Racial Bias in Leadership  
Investigator Name/Department: Abby McVay  
Faculty Thesis Advisor: Dr. Nicole Lozano  
Advisor Phone: 325-483-6116

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You are being asked to participate in a research event conducted with the approval of the Angelo State University Institutional Review Board (and if applicable, other relevant IRB committees). In order to participate, you are required to give your consent after reading this document.

An explanation of the project is written below, which includes information about the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. Please read and, should you decide to participate, indicate your agreement on this form. Upon request, you will be given an unsigned copy of this form for your records. Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in a study, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

***You must be 18 years of age or older to participate, and you must be a resident of the United States.***

**1. Nature and Purpose of the Project**

You are being asked to participate in a research study for Abby McVay at Angelo State University. This study is examining the experiences of people of color in leadership positions and their social positions. This research aims to explore the full depth of leadership and to connect race and leadership research.

**2. Explanation of Procedures.**

This is a study looking at people of color and their experiences in leadership positions. You will be asked to complete a demographic survey that will also ask if you would be interested in completing an interview about your experiences. Completing the demographic survey will take you about 5 to 10 minutes. The principle investigator will contact you via email if you expressed interest in completing an interview. The interview will consist of a series of questions that will inquire about your leadership experiences as a person of color and will last approximately one hour that will be conducted over the phone or via Zoom depending on your preference. To ensure the quality and effectiveness of the study, the interview will be audio recorded or screen recorded if Zoom is utilized. Any identifying information will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used to label the files to ensure confidentiality. Following transcription of the interviews, recordings will be destroyed. The study is being

conducted by Abby McVay, at Angelo State University.

### **3. Discomfort and Risks.**

The risks of participating in this study are minimal and not expected to be greater than experienced in daily life. Some of the questions may cause some individuals to feel uncomfortable, and everyone has the right to decline to answer any questions without penalty.

### **4. Benefits.**

There are no direct benefits to you. There is no compensation for participating in the study. However, the findings from this study can add to the existing knowledge related to race and leadership.

### **5. Confidentiality.**

Your confidentiality is important. Demographic data will be accessible only to the researcher through a secure password-protected online data collection host, Qualtrics. Your interview will be recorded, but the recording will be destroyed once it has been transcribed. Your name will not be linked to any interview data. All data (survey and transcripts) will be stored for a period of 3 years following the completion of the study, after which all data will be deleted. You may risk a loss of confidentiality if you choose to email the researcher to ask for results of the study. If you choose to email the researchers, then the researcher will immediately delete such emails after responding to them. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, and internet transactions.

**Agreement: By typing your legal name below you are indicating that you have read the above procedures and that you are consenting to voluntarily participate in this study.**

Any questions regarding the conduct of the project, questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or research-related injury should be brought to the attention of the IRB administrator, Dr. Tay Hack ([tay@angelo.edu](mailto:tay@angelo.edu)) TEL: (325) 942-2068, ext. 6121.

Any question about this specific research project should be brought to the attention of the investigator listed at the top of this form.

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Signature

Date

**APPROVED**

*By Teresa (Tay) Hack, IRB Chair at 5:39 pm, Oct 26, 2020*

## APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello,

I am a master's student in the Industrial-Organization Psychology program at Angelo State University in San Angelo, Texas, and am in the process of collecting data for my thesis. I am conducting interviews about the experiences of people of color advancing into leadership positions. There is not a lot of research that explores the experiences and knowledge that people of color have as they advance into leadership positions. This is a gap in the literature, as that information is vital to aiding others in their pursuits for advancement. If you are interested in being a research participant, please click [here](#) or the link below to complete a short questionnaire.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [amcvay@angelo.edu](mailto:amcvay@angelo.edu), or my thesis advisor, Dr. Nicole Lozano at [nicole.lozano@angelo.edu](mailto:nicole.lozano@angelo.edu).

Thank you for your time and consideration,  
Abby McVay

**Link:**

[https://angelo.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_cw52wgAw2SYIfU9](https://angelo.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cw52wgAw2SYIfU9)

## APPENDIX D: DEBRIEFING FORM

Thank you for participating in this study! This form provides background about the present research to help you learn more about why we are completing this study. Please feel free to ask any questions or to comment on any aspect of the study.

You have just participated in a research study conducted by Abby McVay, a student at Angelo State University.

This study is examining the experiences of people of color in leadership positions and their social positions. This research aims to explore the full depth of leadership and to connect race and leadership research.

You may keep a copy of this debriefing for your records. Feel free to write down or take a screenshot of this contact information, should you want to contact the experimenters at a later time. If you have questions about the research, please email Abby McVay at [amcvay@angelo.edu](mailto:amcvay@angelo.edu).

All responses are absolutely confidential, and your name will not be linked to the collected data. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study itself or confidentiality, feel free to ask. If any questions arise later, please contact the experimenters of the study at: Abby McVay, e-mail [amcvay@angelo.edu](mailto:amcvay@angelo.edu), my thesis chair Dr. Nicole Lozano ([nicole.lozano@angelo.edu](mailto:nicole.lozano@angelo.edu)) or you may contact the IRB administrator, Dr. Tay Hack ([tay@angelo.edu](mailto:tay@angelo.edu)), TEL: (325) 942-2068, ext. 6121.

## APPENDIX E: ADVANCED QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your race?
  - a. African American/Black
  - b. Asian or Pacific Islander
  - c. Hispanic or Latino
  - d. White
  - e. American Indian or Alaskan Native
2. What is your gender?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Do not want to identify
3. What is your age?
  - a. Open Response: \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your marital status?
  - a. Open Response: \_\_\_\_\_
5. How many siblings do you have?
  - a. Open Response: \_\_\_\_\_
6. How many children do you have?
  - a. Open Response: \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is your highest level of completed education?
  - a. High School/GED
  - b. Some college
  - c. Associate's degree
  - d. Bachelor's degree
  - e. Some graduate school
  - f. Graduate Degree
  - g. Doctoral Degree
8. What level of job are you currently employed in?
  - a. Entry Level
  - b. Coordinator/Supervisor
  - c. Manager/Director/Chairman
  - d. AVP/VP/Dean
  - e. President/Chief Operating Officer/Executive Director
  - f. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
9. How would you like to be contacted for the interview?
  - a. Open Response: \_\_\_\_\_

Follow up questions during the interview will touch on some of the themes introduced in this demographic questionnaire along with additional questions about your life and your experiences in advancing into leadership.

Thank you for your participation.

## APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- I. Research Question 1: How do BIPOC define leadership?**
  - a. Tell me about your current position and nature of work.
  - b. What type of industry are you currently working in?
  - c. How many years of leadership experience do you have?
  - d. What is your definition of leadership?
  - e. How has being BIPOC affected your definition of leadership?
  - f. How has your definition of leadership affected you as a person?
  - g. Based on your definition, do you consider yourself a leader?
  - h. How would you describe your leadership position?
  - i. What specific traits would help demonstrate your definition?
  - j. What reasons do you believe lead you to (not) envision yourself as a leader?
  
- II. Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of leadership among BIPOC?**
  - a. When you hear the work leadership, what are your perceptions that come up?
  - b. What type of personality is favored for leadership?
  - c. What were some experiences that shaped your perceptions of a leader?
  - d. How have your perceptions of leadership impact in your work?
  - e. How have your perceptions of leadership changed since becoming a leader?
  - f. How would you assess your career?
    - i. Are you behind, ahead, or where you expected to be? Why?
  
- III. Research Question 3: What experiences influenced BIPOC to seek leadership advancement?**
  - a. What experiences in being a leader have been your biggest challenges or obstacles?
  - b. What experiences in being a leader have been your biggest support?
  - c. How have those experiences shaped your advancement to leadership?
  - d. Have you participated in a formal organizational program (professional development, mentoring, etc.) that promoted advancement for diverse candidates?
  - e. What/Who impacted your career success to advance to leadership?
  - f. What kind of sacrifices have you made to be where are you?
    - i. Would sacrifice those same sacrifices again? Why or why not?
  
- IV. Research Question 4: What were the systems in place that support and/or hindered leadership opportunities for BIPOC?**
  - a. How did your career rise from your academic and/or work experiences?
  - b. How has your organization helped you in achieving professional success?
    - i. What other support would you have liked?
  - c. What activities that you have participated in helped you in advancing (Education, Courses, Workshops, etc.)
  - d. What has assisted you in advancing to where you are currently?



- e. Have you participated in an informal process or program that promoted advancement for me as a BIPOC?

**V. Closing Questions**

- a. What are some of the reasons BIPOC's underrepresentation in leadership positions?
- b. What barriers exist for BIPOC to advance into leadership?
  - i. How did you overcome those?
- c. How has your race impacted your career and leadership advancements?
- d. What are some knowledge, skills, or abilities necessary for BIPOC succeeding in leadership positions?
  - i. Are they same for white counterparts?
- e. Do you have anything to add to the interview?
- f. Any final comments or questions before we conclude?